Table of Contents

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Front Cover: John M. Mason, D.D. (1770–1829), Presbyterian Minister and Educator. Graphite and charcoal on bristol, Copyright © 2006 by Lori Teibel.
Back Cover: "The West End of Westminster Abbey," taken from *Supplement to the Gentleman's Magazine, for the Year 1751* ([London: E. Cave, 1751]). The addition of the towers to the abbey were completed by 1745.

Editorial

As the 2005 inaugural issue has been generally well received, the publishers are happy to present a second volume of *The Confessional Presbyterian*. As with the first, we believe the reader will find some significant and important material in this 2006 issue of the journal. Last year's issue ran to 184 pages, and as God continues to bless this endeavor we trust we will be able to produce subsequent volumes of similar size. However, the reader will no doubt note that the current issue was blessed with an abundance of matter, and extends to 256 pages. This is due in large part to the lengthy survey of regulative principle literature by Dr. Frank J. Smith, part of which of necessity must be delayed to a subsequent issue. The value of this article may be seen not only in its critical interaction with the literature, but also in that it brings a large sampling of material together in one place, much of which many may be unaware existed. The survey testifies clearly to the fact that adherence to, and interest in, the regulative principle of worship has grown significantly over the last sixty years.

In addition to Dr. Smith's survey, we are pleased to present a "Reviews & Responses" section that has tripled in size. The selection this year contains an interesting mix of critical reviews, replies and responses, including a balanced assessment of Lewis Bevins Schenck's *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant* by Dr. Rowland S. Ward, and a friendly review and response between Dr. J. V. Fesko and Dr. Guy Waters over the latter's *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul*. The various departments introduced and explained in the 2005 "Editorial" continue as well. Of these, we draw special attention to the first-time translation of John Brown of Wamphray's comments on the nature of the universal visible church. We would also note the rather lengthy "Antiquary" entry, on the New York printers T. & J. Swords, one of the most famous firms of the Federal Period. Even though they functioned to a large degree as the publishing house for the Protestant Episcopal Church, the Swords published several important American Presbyterian titles between 1795 and 1806. The first installment of this two-part series presents some interesting information regarding the Presbyterian and Reformed clergy of New York City at the time, which included Dr. Samuel Miller (a picture of whom was featured on the cover of this journal's inaugural issue) and Dr. John Mitchell Mason (whose likeness is on the cover of the present issue). Part two will treat the New York 'High Churchism' controversy which began about 1806 and brought an end to the Swords' occasional work publishing Presbyterian titles.

Of the other featured articles, many will view Dr. R. S. Clark's "Baptism and the Benefits of Christ" as the most significant. The article presented here is a refinement of the lecture given at the January 2006 Westminster Seminary California conference, "Meeting God on His Terms: Word and Sacrament as Means of Grace." Pieces that are more historical in nature include T. J. Phillips' submission on the "Reformed Practice of the Lord's Supper" at the time of the Scottish Reformation; an excellent survey of "Presbyterian Due Process" by Stuart R. Jones; and, since this year is the 300th anniversary of what is thought to be the founding of American Presbyterianism, a piece on Francis Makemie by D. G. Hart. The submission by James Cassidy takes a step back from tackling directly the New Perspectives' view of the doctrine of Justification, to look more generally at "N.T. Wright's approach to interpreting Scripture and his presuppositions with reference to the Bible." Of the remaining pieces, Dr. W. Gary Crampton writes on Open Theism, and Dr. John Delivuk on the often-misunderstood doctrine of Liberty of Conscience, particularly in how it applies to the "worship wars" of our day.

Chris Coldwell ▪

Table of Contents Continued

Baptism and the Benefits of Christ:
The Double Mode of Communion in the Covenant of Grace

By R. Scott Clark, D.Phil.

Introduction

As part of his polemic against the Judaizers of his day, the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans made a remarkable and vital distinction:[1]

> For one is not a Jew who is a Jew outwardly (φανερῶ) but he is a Jew who is one inwardly (κρυπτῶ) … (Romans 2:28–29).

The Apostle did not create this distinction but rather carried on a polemic as old as Moses' exhortation to the Israelites to "circumcise the foreskin" of their hearts (Deut 10:16), and the clear distinction made in Jeremiah 9:25–26 between those who are circumcised only "in the foreskin" and those who are circumcised "in the heart."[2]

In Reformed theology, these passages and others like them have been understood to make a distinction between those who are members of the covenant of grace outwardly and those who are members outwardly, but who have also taken possession of the benefits of Christ by faith. This distinction appears in one way or another in virtually every major and minor systematic theology or survey of the faith from Calvin to the end of the high orthodox period as illustrated by Caspar Olevianus (1536–1587) and Herman Witsius (1636–1708).

Olevianus' covenant theology was premised on his conviction that there are those in the church with whom God has made a covenant of grace, in the narrower sense, and those in the visible church with whom he has not. That is why he titled his major work on covenant theology: *On the Substance of the Covenant of Grace Between God and the Elect*.[3] For Olevian, the covenant of grace, construed narrowly or properly, is made only with the elect. Considered broadly, however, the covenant of grace can be said to include "hypocrites" and "reprobates." They participate in "external worship," but do not enter into fellowship with Christ. Only the elect believe and only they receive Christ's benefits, i.e., the substance of the covenant.[4] Christ is present and offered to the congregation, but Christ and his benefits are received through faith alone.[5] One finds this very same distinction also in the theology of Olevianus' colleague Zacharias Ursinus (1534–1583).[6]

These two Heidelberg theologians articulated a fundamental conviction of the Reformed Churches, that there is a distinction to be made between the church

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1. The Biblical translations in this essay are my own unless otherwise indicated. All quotations from the Greek New Testament are taken from Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2001).

2. This distinction should not be confused with the so-called "Half-Way Covenant" of Colonial American Puritanism. In the Half-Way Covenant, one had to testify to a certain conversion experience. Paul's distinction is not premised on religious experience but faith in Christ which, in turn, is the fruit of election.

3. Caspar Olevianus, *De Substantia Foederis Gratuiti Inter Deum Et Electos* (Geneva: 1585) 3.418.

4. *De substantia*, 2.53, 56. See also ibid., 2.103.

5. See also R. Scott Clark, *Caspar Olevian and the Substance of the Covenant: The Double Benefit of Christ*, ed. David F. Wright, *Rutherford House Studies in Historical Theology* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 2005) 191–201.

6. *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: Sources, History,*

considered as the communion of the saints, in all times and places, and the church considered as a visible institution. Unlike so many individualist American evangelicals, Reformed theology does not teach that it is possible to be a member of the communion of the saints and yet ignore the visible church. The *Belgic Confession* (Art. 28) virtually quotes St. Cyprian when it declares that, "outside of [the visible church], there is no salvation."[7] At the same time the confession (Art. 29) is clear that in the visible church there are always "hypocrites, who are mixed in the Church with the good, yet are not of the Church, though externally in it …" (Schaff, *Creeds*, 3.419). The notion that it is possible to be "in" but not "of" the church is obviously drawn from 1 John 2:19.

Herman Witsius' use of this distinction at the end of the 17th century reflects its fixed position in Reformed orthodoxy:

> … the participation (*communio*) of the covenant of grace is two fold. The one includes merely symbolical and common benefits (*beneficia*), which have no certain connection with salvation, and to which infants are admitted by their relation to parents that are within the covenant; and adults, by the profession of faith and repentance, even though insincere…. The other participation of the covenant of grace, is the partaking of its internal, spiritual, and the saving goods (*bonorum*), as the forgiveness of sins, the writing of the law in the heart, etc. accordingly the apostle makes a distinction between the Jew outwardly and the Jew inwardly,—between circumcision in the flesh and the letter, and circumcision in the heart and Spirit; which, by analogy may be transferred to Christianity. [8]

Thus, in our confessional and classic covenant theology, we have accounted for the co-existence in the visible church of believers and hypocrites by speaking of those who are in the church "externally" only, by baptism, and those who are also in the church "internally" through faith which apprehends Christ and his benefits. Both sets of people are in the covenant of grace but they sustain different relations to it.[9]

The State of the Controversy

Appreciating this distinction is essential to understanding the controversy in which our churches are presently involved regarding baptism and the benefits of Christ. If one denies this distinction then one's understanding of baptism and its relations to the benefits will be altered radically. A group of writers, some of whom are ministers in confessional Reformed and Presbyterian churches, known collectively as the "Federal Vision" are, however, either denying or calling into question the distinction between the church visible and church invisible and with that they are proposing that there is no distinction between those who in the covenant of grace externally and internally.[10]

Though they are not very clear about this, the Federal Vision writers suggest that there is both an eternal, unconditional election and an historical, conditional, temporary and therefore uncertain election, which relates to the administration of the covenant of grace. This latter election is said to be "real" such that to fall away from it is "real apostasy."[11] They propose that the biblical and truly Reformed view of baptism, the church, and the benefits of Christ is that by virtue of their baptism, every baptized person is brought into union with Christ and into temporary possession, at least, of the benefits of election and union with Christ, namely, justification, adoption, saving faith, and sanctification.[12]

and Theology, *Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought,* ed. Lyle D. Bierma (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005) 185–86.

7. Phillip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983) 3.418.

8. Modified from the translation in Herman Witsius, *Sacred Dissertations on the Apostles' Creed*, ed. Donald Fraser, 2 vols. (Edinburgh and Glasgow: A. Fullarton & Co. and Khull, Blackie & Co., 1823) 2.354–355. Herman Witsius, *Hermanni Witsii Exercitationes Sacrae in Symbolum Quod Apostolorum Dicitur Et in Orationem Dominicam*, 3rd ed. (Amsterdam: 1697) 453–454. See also, Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, trans. William Crookshank, 2 vols. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing; repr., 1990) 1.353.

9. In his essay expressing doubts about the visible/invisible distinction, Doug Wilson cites John Murray. The latter did raise questions about the utility of the adjective "invisible." His point, however, was that what has been called the invisible church is only found in the visible church. He did not reject the distinction to the same effect or for the same purpose as Klaas Schilder, Norman Shepherd, and the Federal Vision Theologians. There is not a hint in Murray that baptism confers a temporary, conditional election and union with Christ that can be retained or lost by obedience or disobedience. See John Murray, "The Church: Its Definition in Terms of 'Visible' and 'Invisible' Invalid," in *Collected Writings* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976–1982) 1.231–236. See also Douglas Wilson, "The Church Visible or Invisible," in *The Federal Vision*, ed. Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner (Monroe, La.: Athanasius Press, 2004) 265–269. Hereafter *The Federal Vision.*

10. The designation "Federal Vision" is one the proponents have applied to themselves in books and conferences.

11. This is the approach of Jeffrey D. Niell, "The New Covenant, Membership, Apostasy, and Language," in Andrew P. Sandlin, ed., *The Backbone of the Bible: Covenant in Contemporary Perspective* (Nacogdoches, Tex.: Covenant Media Press, 2004) 138–145.

12. For the purposes of this essay these elements of the *ordo salutis* shall be described as the "the benefits of Christ."

Thesis

In contrast to the claims of the Federal Vision, I argue that Scripture teaches that there is a distinction to be made between those who have the substance of the covenant of grace, i.e., union with Christ, justification, and sanctification, and those who are in the covenant of grace but who participate only in its external administration. Further, I argue that baptism initiates the baptized person into the authorized, official sphere of God's saving work and recognizes one's membership in the covenant of grace. This initiation does not confer Christ's benefits *ex opere operato*. Rather, the promise of baptism is that whoever believes has what the sign signifies and seals.

Current Literature

Some of the views addressed in this essay can be traced to the teaching of Klaas Schilder (1890–1952), the founder of the Liberated Reformed Churches (*Gereformeerde Kerken Vrijgemaakt*) in the Netherlands in the 1940's.[13] Schilder and his followers rejected the traditional internal/external distinction as expressed by Olevianus and Witsius. They argued that the covenant of grace is, "*Alles of niets*"—all or nothing. They argued that everyone in the covenant of grace sustains the same relations to Christ "head for head."[14]

As we shall see, rejecting the internal/external distinction has far reaching consequences and it set the stage for the Federal Vision doctrine of baptismal benefits. Schilder's rejection or redefinition of other elements of classical Reformed theology such as the covenant of redemption and the covenant of works also contributed to what has become the Federal Vision covenant theology.[15]

Since the mid 1970's Norman Shepherd has elaborated on Schilder's position.[16] He argues that the "heart of covenant privilege is union and communion with God." With that privilege, however, comes responsibility. We are to be covenant keepers and pattern our covenant-keeping after Christ, "the covenant keeper par excellence (Shepherd, "Evangelism," 55).

According to Shepherd (and Schilder, and John Barach as will be noted), the decree of election must be viewed only through the lens of the covenant of grace (60). E.g., Ephesians, he says, was not written from the point of view of election, but from the point of view of "covenant." Thus Paul called everyone in the Ephesian congregation, "elect" (63–64). Some in the Ephesian congregation may fall away. If so, then they were not elect. Implied in this argument is the existence of a type of election that is historical and conditional and not identical to eternal, unconditional election. Shepherd and his followers refer to this historical, conditional election as "covenantal election."

Explaining Jesus' discourse on the vine and the branches in John 15, he argues that the faithful and disobedient branches do not refer to two modes of visible communion in the church. He recognizes that the terms "inward" and "outward" are biblical terms (Rom 2:28–29), but they do not refer to elect and reprobate in the visible church or even to believers and unbelievers, but to "covenantally loyal Jews and disobedient transgressors."[17]

These conclusions lead him to a third thesis. It is not regeneration but baptism that is the transition from death to life.[18] He explicitly denies that this view entails baptismal regeneration, and he is formally correct, for it actually entails much more.

One finds this system expressed even more clearly in two recent essays by John Barach in collections of essays advocating or discussing the Federal Vision theology. In

13 For an introduction to Schilder's life and work see J. Geertsma. ed., *Always Obedient: Essays on the Teachings of Dr. Klaas Schilder* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 1995).

14. See John Barach, "Covenant and Election," in *The Auburn Avenue Theology Pros & Cons: Debating the Federal Vision*, ed. E. Calvin Beisner (Fort Lauderdale, Fla.: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004) 151.

15. As a matter of rhetoric, when proponents of the Federal Vision theology speak of "Dutch Reformed theology," this seems to be code for Klaas Schilder's idiosyncratic system of covenant theology. They are not referring to the orthodox Dutch Reformed theologians of the 16th and 17th centuries. For more on this see R. Scott Clark, ed., *The Foolishness of the Gospel: Covenant and Justification* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, forthcoming).

16. Norman Shepherd, "The Covenant Context for Evangelism," in *The New Testament Student and Theology*, ed. John H. Skilton (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1976) 1.23.13.

17. Shepherd, "Evangelism," 65. In this reading, Shepherd anticipated some of the conclusions of the New Perspective.

18. Shepherd, "Evangelism," 66. In response to Sinclair Ferguson's critical review (see footnote 40 below) Shepherd conceded that it is improper to say that baptism is the "point of transition" from death to life. He revised his language to say, "Baptism marks the point of transition from death to life." It is notable that even after revising his language, he did not relate his view of baptism to the definition of faith "receiving and resting" as the sole instrument of justification. For those who believe, baptism may be said retrospectively, to have marked a transition. That is in the nature of sacramental language, but Shepherd made no such distinction in 1977 and continues to neglect it. See Norman Shepherd, "More on Covenant Evangelism," *The Banner of Truth* (November 1977) 25; idem, *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illumines Salvation and Evangelism* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2000) 100–101.

one essay,[19] he affirms an unconditional, eternal predestination, but he reacts to that view of election which denies assurance to all but the few who have had a sort of second blessing. His response to that abuse of the doctrine of election is to so objectify the covenant of grace and baptism with the result that baptism confers election and union with Christ.[20]

Because all baptized persons are in the covenant of grace in the same way, Barach concludes that all baptized persons are, in an historical, temporary sense, elect.[21] He says, "Each Israelite was grafted into God's people as an act of God's electing love" ("Covenant and Election," 26). This, he says, is the clear teaching of 1 Corinthians 1 and 1 Peter 2. He says repeatedly that the good news to the visible congregation is that they are all, "as members of the Church" individually elect (27). "Christ is the Elect One … and in Him we have been chosen" (28).

What does this mean for baptism? Those, he says, who make the internal/external distinction have reduced baptism to a mere sprinkling. Every baptized person is "in Christ" (20–22). This, he claims, was Calvin's view, and the view of the confessions (23).

> The whole church is in Christ. They have been baptized into Christ. They have clothed themselves with Christ (Gal. 3:27). Paul wants them to know that all of these blessings he is praising God for are theirs in Christ. There is nothing missing in Christ Jesus. Everything you need is found in Him and *you* are in Him. That's the good news Paul wants the Ephesians to know (29).

The ground for his conclusion is that the Apostles called their congregations "elect." Like Shepherd, Barach rejects the traditional Reformed notion of a "judgment of charity," preferring to think of every baptized person as elect (30–31).

He says that he wants to speak to the congregation unequivocally, as the apostles did. The promises of baptism are real, which means that by baptism, every baptized person is elect, united to Christ and has the benefits of Christ. Just as the baptized are covenantally but genuinely elect, apostasy is just as real.

His distinction, however, between the historical, temporary benefits of Christ and eternal election is not absolute. In baptism, he says, the promise is that "God chose you to be in His covenant, to have that bond with him in Christ. That choice, worked in history when you were baptized, is grounded in God's eternal predestination" (36). In baptism one is not only "engrafted into the church" but also "joined to Christ, the Elect One." Those baptized who turn out to be reprobates, were "joined covenantally to Christ, the chief Cornerstone"(37). God began to work in them to will and to do, but he did not continue to work in them so they did not persevere. So, in the end, apostasy is not falling from temporary benefits, but falling from actual, eternal election.

Barach does not attempt to square these two positions but rather says that the relations between the facts of election, the baptismal, covenantal union with Christ, and apostasy are mysterious.[22] As this brief survey suggests, there are areas of tension if not incoherence in the Federal Vision doctrine of baptismal benefits, and it is far from clear that their doctrine of baptismal benefits is congruent with or faithful to the confessions they subscribe.

Method

In the balance of this article, I will survey briefly the way the church has approached the relations between the substance of the covenant of grace and its administration. Second, I will pay close attention to four Biblical texts that are central to this discussion. Third, from those texts I will draw some theological conclusions. Fourth, I will respond to some of the claims by the Federal Vision theology regarding baptism and, fifth, I will make some observations about the practical implications of this doctrine.

19. John Barach, "Covenant and Election," in *The Federal Vision*; idem, "Covenant and Election," in *The Auburn Avenue Theology*.

20. Barach, "Covenant and Election," in *The Federal Vision*, 19. Barach's use of an aberrant view creates a straw man which he then uses as a ground to propose radical revisions to Reformed theology. This discussion would be advanced if Barach would interact with the views of widely received, influential, and magisterial Reformed theologians from the Reformed tradition such as those discussed in this essay.

21. Barach, "Covenant and Election," in *The Federal Vision*, 25. He argues from Deuteronomy 6, that all the Israelites were historically elect.

22. Barach, "Covenant and Election," in *The Federal Vision*, 33. One also finds these same views in essays by Rich Lusk and Steve Wilkins. See Rich Lusk, "Paedobaptism and Baptismal Efficacy: Historic Trends and Current Controversies," in *The Federal Vision*, 71–97. See also Rich Lusk, *Faith, Baptism, and Justification* (January 2, 2006 [cited); available from http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/faith_baptism_and_justification.htm. Rich Lusk, "New Life and Apostasy: Hebrews 6:4–8 as Test Case," in *The Federal Vision*, 271–290. Steve Wilkins says. "Those who ultimately prove to be reprobate may be in covenant with God. They may enjoy for a season the blessings of the covenant, including the forgiveness of sins, adoption, possession of the kingdom, sanctification, etc., and yet apostatize and fall short of the grace of God." Steve Wilkins, "Covenant, Baptism and Salvation," in *The Federal Vision*, 62.

Historical Theology

Augustine (350–434): Sacrament and Efficacy

In his debate with the Donatist schismatics (ca. 400), Augustine remarked that "the reason why the blessed Cyprian and other eminent Christians … decided that Christ's baptism could not exist among heretics or schismatics was that they failed to distinguish between the sacrament and efficacy or working out of a sacrament" (*De baptismo*, 6.1).[23]

He tended to speak of baptism as the laver of regeneration, which became the traditional language of the church, and he did suggest that baptism regenerates the baptized. He also taught that it is the Holy Spirit who gives us new life and that may happen apart from baptism and that it is by faith that we have the remission of sins. "[B]aptism," he said, "is one thing" and "the conversion of the heart is another."[24] Nevertheless, there were unresolved tensions in Augustine's theology of baptism. The medieval church resolved those tensions by capitalizing and enlarging on his idea of baptismal regeneration.

The Medieval Views: Ex Opere Operato

According to Peter Lombard (c.1100–1160) baptism initiates the process of eventual, progressive justification by graciously renewing the baptized person.[25] For the Lombard, we are as justified as we are sanctified and we are as sanctified as we cooperate with grace.

According to Thomas Aquinas (c.1224)–1274) at baptism all sins are washed away. He appealed to Ezekiel 36:25, "I will pour upon you clean water, and you shall be cleansed from all your filthiness."[26] He also argued from Romans 6:3, that:

> Hence it is clear that by Baptism man dies unto the oldness of sin, and begins to live unto the newness of grace. But every sin belongs to the primitive oldness. Consequently every sin is taken away by Baptism (3a, 69.1).

In the next article he continued: "by Baptism a man is incorporated in the Passion and death of Christ, according to Rm. 6:8 …" (3a, 69.2).

The mainline of medieval theology taught that in the act of baptism, the baptized person is forgiven all sins, dies to sin, is regenerated, and is united to Christ and thus begins the journey to justification. Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas would agree with the Federal Vision, that the Spirit works necessarily through baptism to unite the baptized person to Christ because baptism necessarily confers what it signifies and these benefits are retained by grace and cooperation with grace. This was the doctrine of baptismal benefits promulgated in Session 7 of the Council of Trent (1547) and remains the magisterial doctrine of the Roman church.

Luther: Baptism as Gospel

For Luther, baptism is the gospel made visible and the Christian life is a baptized life.[27] Both the *Small Catechism* (1529) and the *Augsburg Confession* (1530) teach that baptism "gives" the "forgiveness of sins."[28] Paul Althaus says that Luther's "doctrine of baptism is basically nothing else than his doctrine of justification in concrete form" (Althaus, 356).

For our purposes here, however, it is important to realize that, for Luther, the Spirit is so embedded in the sacrament that it must accomplish in the baptized what it signifies. This view created significant tensions in Lutheran theology between Luther's doctrine of predestination, the basic commitment to justification *sola fide* and the recognition that baptized people apostatize. To resolve this tension, confessional Lutheranism concluded that though election is unconditional, it and what is given in baptism can be lost if we resist grace.[29]

Calvin: Baptism as Covenant Sign and Seal

John Calvin (1509–1559) was unambiguous about the

23. Henry Bettenson, ed., *The Later Christian Fathers. A Selection from the Writings of the Fathers from St. Cyril of Jerusalem to St. Leo the Great* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970) 241.

24. *De Baptismo*, 4.31, 32; Sermon 71.19 in Bettenson, *The Later Christian Fathers*, 142–143.

25. *Peter Lombard*, *Magistri Petri Lombardi Parisiensis Episcopi Sententiae in IV Libris Distinctae,* 3rd edn, 2 vols, *Spicilegium Bonaventurianum* (Rome: Collegii S. Bonaventurae Ad Claras Aquas, 1971–1981) 4 ds. 2–3, d. 4 cs. 5–7, d. 5 (esp. c. 3). I am grateful to Brannan Ellis for pointing me to these references.

26. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ*, ed. Thomas Gilby, 60 vols. (London and New York: Blackfriars, 1963) 3a, 69.1.

27. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 355–374.

28. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000) 43, 183–184, 319–120, 359–60, 438.

29. E.g., Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 579–580. There is some irony here since some of the language of the Federal Vision writers regarding baptism sounds remarkably like that of our Lutheran cousins—while they accuse Reformed confessionalists of a "Lutheran" dichotomy between law and gospel in justification. See P. Andrew Sandlin, "Lutheranized Calvinism: Gospel or Law, or Gospel and Law," *Reformation & Revival* 11 (2002) 123–35.

benefits of baptism. In the first edition (1536) of his *Institutio* he explicitly rejected the doctrine of baptismal regeneration and he was consistent on this point until his death.[30] In places where he might have taught baptismal regeneration, e.g., in his lectures on John 3:5, he explicitly rejected it.[31] Baptismal regeneration does not appear in the *Genevan Confession* or in the Genevan Catechism (1545).[32] Calvin taught throughout his ministry that the sacraments are signs and seals which the Spirit uses to confer comfort and assurance, not election, union with Christ, or regeneration. He defined baptism this way:

> Baptism is the sign of the initiation by which we are received into the society of the church, in order that, engrafted in Christ, we may be reckoned among God's children.[33]

Notice that he begins with the language of signification and relations to the "*societas Christi.*" For Calvin, baptism is most closely connected to our being "inserted into Christ" (*Christo insiti*), but neither baptism nor the Spirit working through baptism are said to create this union. In the first instance, Calvin considered the external effect of baptism. It has been given (*datus est*) that we might be "counted" (*censeamur*) among God's people. It serves our faith but also acts as a confession before men (*OS*, 5.285.14–16).

Fundamentally, baptism is to strengthen our faith, not replace it. It is more than a mere token (*tessera*) or mark (*nota*) of our Christian profession. It is also a "*symbolum*" and "documentum" and a "diplomatic seal" to those who believe, that what baptism promises is actually true of them (*OS*, 5.285.20–21).

Calvin addressed the very point at issue here, i.e., whether baptism unites the baptized person to Christ, and with that union, justification etc. He wrote:

> Lastly, our faith receives from baptism the advantage of its sure testimony to us that we are not only engrafted into the death and life of Christ, but so united to Christ himself that we become sharers in all his blessings. For he dedicated and sanctified baptism in his own body in order that he might have it in common with us as the firmest bond of the union and fellowship which he has deigned to form with us (*Institutes* 4.15.5; *OS*, 5.288.21–22).

Notice that, for Calvin, baptism is not said to effect union with Christ, but to serve as a testimony of our union. Baptism says that the believer *is* united to Christ, not that it effected that union. "It shows (*ostendit*) our mortification in Christ and our new life in him." Calvin goes on to say that "through baptism Christ has made (*fecerit*) us sharers (*participes*) in his death, that we may be engrafted in it" (*OS*, 5.288.29–30).

The question is not whether we have been baptized into Christ's death, or whether "through baptism Christ makes us sharers in his death," but what Calvin meant by that language. He elaborated by appealing to organic metaphors (twigs and roots). Those baptized persons with "right faith" (*fide vere*) ought to experience the efficacy of union with Christ's death and resurrection (*OS*, 2.88.31–32). Baptized persons ought to believe and thus receive what baptism signifies and seals to believers.

Calvin's doctrine of baptism must be interpreted in the light of his doctrine of justification *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, about which he was unambiguous. It must also be interpreted in the context of his use of the internal/external distinction. Thus, for Calvin, faith and baptism have quite distinct functions. Faith receives righteousness and union with Christ, whereas baptism signifies and seals that union. This seems clear from his lecture on Romans 6:4 where he recognized that Paul was speaking of those who believe, and in with that assumption "joins the substance and the effect with the external sign." Nevertheless, what the Lord offers in the visible symbol "is ratified" (*ratum est*) by faith. Whenever the dominical institution and faith are united, the sacrament is not "*nuda inanique.*"[34]

In contrast to Calvin's view, the Federal Vision does not locate their doctrine of baptism in an unambiguous doctrine of justification, and Calvin distinguished more clearly between the "*res*" and the "*res significata*" than the Federal Vision writers do, because he con-

30. G. Baum, E. Cunitz, and E. Reuss, eds., *Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, 59 vols., *Corpus Reformatorum* (Brunsvigae: C. A. Schwetschke et Filium, 1863–1897) 29.110–118. Hereafter designated as *CO*.

31. Helmut Feld, ed., *In Evangelium Secundum Johannem Commmentarius*, 2 vols., *Ioannis Calvini Opera Omnia Series II: Ioannis Calvini Opera Exegetica* (Geneva: Droz, 1997) 1.87–89.

32. *CO*, 12.91, 105; H. A. Niemeyer, *Collectio Confessionum in Ecclesiis Reformatis Publicatarum* (Leipzig: Julius Klinkhardt, 1840) 163–164.

33. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., *Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) 4.15.1. See also Ioannis Calvini, *Opera Selecta*, ed. P. Barth and G. Niesel, 5 vols. (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1962) 5.285.12–13. Hereafter designated as *OS*.

34. T. H. L. Parker, ed., *Commentarius in Epistolam Pauli Ad Romanos*, *Ioannis Calvini Opera Omnia, Series II: Ioannis Calvini Opera Exegetica* (Geneva: Droz, 1999) 119.24–25, 28–29. "Nam suo more Paulus, quia ad fideles est sermo, substantiam et effectum externo signo coniungit."

sidered baptism in the light of his distinction between those who have the substance of the covenant of grace and those who only participate in the covenant of grace externally.

Calvin understood that, in this life, though we do not know who are elect, we must recognize that there are two classes of people in the congregation. For this very reason, rather than speaking of an historic, conditional, temporary set of benefits conferred by baptism, Calvin used the doctrine of election to explain why the visible church has two kinds of people within it. "Therefore the secret election and inner vocation of God is to be considered."[35] In the visible church there are always "many hypocrites mixed in, who have nothing of Christ except the title and appearance."[36] Calvin quite intentionally and clearly distinguished between the "*signum*" of the sacrament and its "*veritas*." He did so because one receives from baptism only as much as one receives in faith (*OS*, 5.296.9–11). Thus, he counseled the very "judgment of charity," which the Federal Vision rejects as condescending and superfluous (*Institutes*, 4.1.9).

Confessions

After Calvin's death, the Reformed Churches continued to make and elaborate on the same distinctions Calvin used. In Q. 20 the *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563) asks, "Are all men, then, saved by Christ as they have perished in Adam?" The answer is, "No, only those who by true faith are ingrafted (*einverleibt*) into Him and receive all His benefits" (Schaff, *Creeds*, 3.313). Does baptism "ingraft" the baptized into Christ? Not according to the next question which defines true faith as:

> "a certain knowledge and hearty trust … which the Holy Spirit works in me by the Gospel, that not only to others, but to me also, forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness, and salvation are freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits (3.313).

Note well that the Heidelberg says that it is the Holy Spirit who works faith in the elect through the preached gospel, not the sacrament of baptism. Question 65 clarifies how we are united to Christ:

> Since, then, we are made partakers of Christ and all his benefits by faith only, where does this faith come from?
>
> The Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts by the preaching of the Holy Gospel, and confirms it by the use of the holy sacraments (3.328).

This doctrine of Spirit-wrought faith as the sole instrument of justification and union with Christ would seem to be impossible to reconcile with the Federal Vision doctrine of the baptismal benefits. According to Question 66, the function of the sacraments is not the creation of union with Christ, but the confirmation of union received through faith.

> The sacraments are visible, holy signs and seals appointed by God for this end, that by their use He may the more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the Gospel, namely, that of free grace He grants us the forgiveness of sins and everlasting life for the sake of the one sacrifice of Christ accomplished on the cross (3.328).

The Westminster Standards teach precisely the same doctrine as the Heidelberger on baptism and union. *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647) 27.2 says:

> There is in every sacrament a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified: whence it comes to pass, that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other.[37]

We confess a "sacramental union" precisely to avoid conflating the sacrament with the thing signified. In sacramental speech, the sacrament can stand for the thing signified, as in Gen 17, where God calls circumcision "my covenant," but the Confession understands such speech as "sacramental" language not a literal identity. Thus WCF 28.1 calls baptism a

> sacrament of the New Testament, ordained … not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church; but also, to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life.

35. *OS*, 5.3.14–15. "Ita et arcana electio Dei et interior vocatio spectanda est."

36. *OS*, 5.12.19–20. "In hac autem plurimi sunt permixti hypocritae, qui nihil Christi habent praeter titulum et speciem."

37. S. W. Carruthers, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: Being an Account of the Preparation and Printing of Its Seven Leading Editions, to Which Is Appended a Critical Text of the Confession* (Manchester: R. Aikman & Son, 1937) 145.

The *Westerminster Confession* does not say that baptism effects our ingrafting into Christ, regeneration, remission of sins etc., but rather teaches that the sacrament is a sign and seal of the reality received through faith "receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness" (11.2, Carruthers, 113).

The confessional theology of baptism must be read in the context of the confessional internal/external distinction and in the context of the confessional distinction between the visible and invisible church. These distinctions are affirmed either explicitly or implicitly in all our confessional documents. For example, in *Belgic Confession*, Art. 29, we confess that there is a "company of hypocrites (*compagnie des hypocrites*), who are mixed in the Church with the good, yet are not of the Church, though externally in it (*soient présents quant au corps*) …" (3.419).

Heidelberg Catechism questions 54 and 55 make a distinction between the Holy Catholic church, which it treats as the church invisibly considered, and the "communion of saints" which it treats as the church visible. It also speaks explicitly (Q. 81, *Creeds,* 3.336) about the presence of baptized members whom it calls hypocrites (*Heuchler*).

The *Westminster Confession* (25.1, 2) affirms explicitly and unequivocally the existence of the "catholic or universal Church which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect …" (Carruthers, 139). The answer to *Westminster Larger Catechism* Q.31 implies a distinction between those who are in the invisible church and those who are only in the visible church, when it says that the "Covenant of Grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the Elect as his seed."[38]

The church is also considered as the "visible church," which is "also catholic or universal" and "consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion … out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation." Read in their context, the Reformed confessional language concerning baptismal efficacy takes on a quite different tone and sense from that found in the *Federal Vision* writers.

Reformed Orthodoxy

One of the reasons the Federal Vision writers feel the liberty to reject or revise accepted Reformed terms, distinctions, and categories, is because they seem unaware of the Reformed tradition before the 20th century and unaware of modern scholarship that has reversed decades of prejudice against Reformed orthodoxy or scholasticism.[39] Recent scholarship, however, has shown that the older assumption of discontinuity between Calvin and the orthodox is untenable.[40]

The Reformed orthodox made frequent use of the internal/external distinction found in Calvin and in the confessions. Olevianus explained that we are called "Christians … because we believe in Christ and are baptized into his name. This faith in Christ is the anointing that we have received from Christ and that remains ours for ever."

He knew nothing of a temporary or conditional or historical election or union with Christ and certainly knew nothing of a union with Christ wrought through baptism. For Caspar Olevianus, we are justified "through faith" and baptism is the "testimony" that, as believers, we are members of Christ. [41] According to Olevianus, "… the Holy Spirit is that bond of the union by which Christ abides in us and we in him." It is only by the work of the Spirit "who incorporates us into Christ ... that we can share in Christ and all his benefits...."[42]

In the early 17th century, a few years before the Synod of Dort, Johannes Wollebius (1586–1629) wrote that "The purpose of baptism, besides others that it has in common with the holy supper, is the confirmation both of one's reception, or ingrafting into the family of God, and his regeneration."[43]

William Ames, who was an important influence on

38. Assembly of Divines, *The Humble Advice of the Assembly of Divines, Now by the Authority of Parliament Sitting at Westminster Concerning a Larger Catechisme* (London: 1648) 9. This language would seem to be irreconcilable with the Federal Vision doctrine of baptismal benefits. If the covenant of grace, considered narrowly, is only with the elect then those who are not included in that covenant cannot be in union with Christ.

39. For an introduction to this scholarship see Carl R. Trueman and R. Scott Clark, eds., *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999). See also Richard A. Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition*, *Oxford Studies in Historical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Willem J. Van Asselt and Eef Dekker, eds., *Reformation and Scholasticism*, *Text and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001); Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, Ca. 1520 to Ca. 1725*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003).

40. In a review published in *The Banner of Truth* (July–August [1977] 61), Sinclair Ferguson criticized Norman Shepherd for making just this historical error.

41. Caspar Olevianus, *A Firm Foundation. An Aid to Interpreting the Heidelberg Catechism*, ed. Richard A. Muller, trans. Lyle D. Bierma, *Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995) 45.

42. Olevianus, *Firm Foundation*, 92.

43. Johannes Wollebius, *Christianae Theologiae Compendium*, ed. E. Bizer (Neukirchen: Kreis Moers, 1935) 1.23.13.

the Synod of Dort, a bridge between British Puritanism and Dutch Reformed orthodoxy, and a seminal Reformed theologian in the Netherlands, said that "the special application of God's favor and grace which arises from true faith is very much confirmed and furthered by the sacraments." The "sacramental signs do not include the spiritual thing to which they refer in any physically inherent or adherent sense for then the signs and the things signified would be the same."[44] He continued, "Those who partake of the signs do not necessarily partake of the spiritual thing itself…."[45]

Archbishop Usher, who was a significant influence leading up to the Westminster Assembly, never spoke of union with Christ relative to baptism. Rather he called union with Christ the fruit of justification and faith alone is the instrument of justification. The Holy Spirit working through the preached Word is the agent of union, not baptism.[46]

There was a consistent pattern in Reformed orthodoxy. When Reformed theology thought of "union with Christ," it thought of the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit, who regenerates, who gives faith, and who, through faith, unites the believer to Christ. Baptism is a sign and seal of this union, but it neither creates it nor does God necessarily create this union through baptism.

Exegetical Theology

Genesis 17

In the history of salvation God's covenant with Abraham was the paradigm for his saving work and word. It was to this covenant that the apostle Peter appealed in his sermon on Pentecost (Acts 2:39) and by which Stephen defended himself before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:2–8, 17). The apostle Paul appealed to this covenant in his synagogue sermon in Antioch (Acts 13:32), in his defense before Agrippa (Acts 26:6), in his epistle to the Romans, and in his argument with the Judaizers (Rom. 4; Gal. 3:13–29, 4:22–31). In the history of covenant theology the Reformed have always regarded this passage as foundational for our understanding of the covenant of grace.

In Genesis 17, Yahweh comes to Abram and enters into a covenant with him requiring that (v. 10) every male shall be circumcised. Verses 12 and 13 add that every male in the household must be circumcised. This is Yahweh's "covenant in your flesh."

It is clear that, as part of the administration of the covenant made with Abraham, both infant and adult males other than Abraham were to be circumcised, including slaves. The Federal Vision writers assume correctly a close connection between baptism and circumcision as roughly equivalent sacraments. Like baptism, circumcision was a sign of initiation and every male in Abraham's house was eligible because, for purposes of covenant administration, they were regarded as subsidiaries of the covenant head. They were recipients of the promises of the covenant of grace just as the infants were and so were included in the initiation rite.

If, however, their view, that baptism confers the benefits of Christ to every recipient, is correct, then we should conclude that every member of Abraham's household also received Christ's benefits by virtue of circumcision. Yet nothing in the narrative suggests that this was the case. Indeed, in v. 23, the first person, other than Abraham, mentioned as being initiated into the Abrahamic covenant was Hagar's son Ishmael (Gen. 16: 5) whom Paul uses (in Gal. 4) as the prototypical reprobate in contrast to Isaac.

Romans 4:9–11

In Romans 4:9–11 Paul explains the meaning of Abraham's covenant initiation. Abraham's "faith was reckoned" to him "as righteousness…." "He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised." Paul did not interpret Abraham's circumcision as having conferred all Christ's benefits to be retained by "faithfulness." For Paul, Abraham's circumcision served as the sort of guarantee described above.

Paul's interpretation of Abraham's circumcision, and its corollary, the inward/outward distinction served as the basis for the distinction made by Olevianus and the rest of the Reformed tradition between the *substance* of the divine promise, "I will be your God and a God to

44. William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, trans. John Dykstra Eusden (Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth, 1983) 197.

45. Ames, 198. Ames' doctrine of baptismal benefits was identical to that of the "conforming spiritual brotherhood" including William Perkins, Richard Sibbes, and John Preston. See E. Brooks Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in Old and New England 1570–1720* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974) 38–51. Holifield also describes the 17th century controversy surrounding the "sacramentalism," of Samuel Ward and Cornelius Burgess, which in certain respects, seems to have been resuscitated by the Federal Vision. See Holifield, 78–87. The mainline of British confessional Calvinism rejected their doctrines of baptismal benefits.

46. James Usher, *A Bodie of Divinitie or the Summe and Substance of Christian Religion* (London: 1653) 190–191.

your children" and the *administration* of that promise through circumcision and baptism.

Shepherd's claim that the adverbs φανερῶ and κρυπτῶ refer to "covenantally loyal Jews and disobedient transgressors" assumes a false definition of faith in the act of justification.[47] Abraham the believer is the prototypical "inward" Jew. His circumcision signified and sealed what God the Spirit had already accomplished in him through the divine promise. Paul does not say that Abraham was justified because he was faithful (πιστός), but because he believed (ἐπίστευσεν) the promise.[48] The contrast here is not between "covenantally loyal" and disloyal Jews, but between belief and unbelief, behind which lies eternal election. In this passage, circumcision and baptism serve as external signs and seals of promise of the covenant made with Abraham. It does not confer Christ's benefits, but it does promise and confirm them to those who believe.

Romans 6:1–5

The Federal Vision advocates appeal to Romans 6 as perhaps the chief proof of their doctrine that baptism unites us to Christ. There are some modern scholars who have read this passage in a way that might seem to support their view, or in ways that might lead to this understanding;[49] but, as we saw, that was not Calvin's interpretation nor has it been the historic Reformed understanding of the passage.[50]

There are compelling reasons that arise from a close consideration of the passage itself, which pushed the Reformed away from the view that the act of baptism unites the baptized to Christ, the first of which is the context of the passage. The issue in Romans 6 was the motive for and necessity of sanctity. The question before Paul was this: Is it the case that, having been justified *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, we may sin with impunity? Paul picks up the theme of 5:20. Given the "hyper-abundance" of grace, does it follow that we should sin so that there might be even more grace? Paul's answer was unequivocal: "It ought never to be." We cannot "live in sin," because "we died to sin" (v. 2). So, read in context, Paul's interest in not to argue that baptism confers Christ's benefits, but rather to appeal to it as an illustration of the union (and concomitant benefits) that already exists by faith. We who believe, who are united to Christ by the work of the Spirit, who were baptized, "were baptized into his death…." We were not only baptized into his death and burial, by baptism we are also identified with his resurrection and thus ought to live as those who have been united to Christ's resurrection.

Several observations are in order. First, as closely as Paul relates the sign to the thing signified in this passage, he nowhere says that baptism unites the baptized to Christ. The function of Paul's appeal to baptism is not to teach that baptism does anything per se. Rather, he appeals to baptism as an illustration, or a sign of what was already true of them. He uses sacramental language, using the *signum* for the *res significata*. On their hermeneutic, the Federal Vision interpretation does not go far enough. If baptism per se confers union with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, then these must be permanent and not provisional. For Paul, death, burial, and resurrection are not soteric events to be repeated either historically or in the life of the believer.

There is no question whether believers are united to Christ. There is no question whether those united to Christ have died with him. There is no question whether there are moral consequences of union with Christ. What is also clear is that Paul nowhere says either that baptism accomplishes or that the Spirit effects union with Christ through baptism.

Colossians 2:11–13

Here the apostle Paul speaks of our union with Christ and he connects it to both baptism and circumcision. This passage is primarily about our union with Christ. Circumcision and baptism serve as correlate illustrations of our union with Christ by faith.

In verse eleven Paul says "in him" (ἐν ᾧ) or "into whom also you were circumcised." The point here is the nature and consequence of our union with Christ. That is what it means to say " in whom." Paul was warning the Colossian congregation about the danger of any attempt to present one's self before God on the basis of our obedience. This much is evident from Paul's warning in v. 8 regarding "philosophy and empty deception" (φιλοσοφίας καὶ κενῆς ἀγαπης).

Paul's answer to moralism is the incarnation of God

47. "Evangelism," 65. Shepherd does not defend this interpretation or cite any of his exegetical influences. This line of interpretation, however, seems to have anticipated the reading of Paul offered by the New Perspective on Paul.

48. Paul does not use πιστός in Romans.

49. Herman N. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard de Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 59, 408–411.

50. E.g., see Olevianus, *De substantia*, 2.65, where he interprets Romans 6:3–6 as a "testimonium divinum adoptionis nostrae seu unionis cum Christo Dei Filio"…(*De substantia,* 2.65). See Caspar Olevianus, *In Epistolam D. Pauli Apostoli Ad Romanos Notae, Ex Concionibus G. Oleviani Excerptae*, ed. Theodore Beza (Geneva: 1579) 237–241.

the Son, whose righteousness is the ground of our standing before God, thus raising the question of the nature of our relation to Christ. The answer, in v. 10, is that "you have been filled in him" (ἐστὲ ἐν αὐτῷ πεπληρωμένοι). This is legal, relational (not realistic) language. In verse eleven he gives us an analogy that explains how we are filled with Christ. The "internal/external" distinction is also at work here. Again, "into whom" (ἐν ᾧ) you were circumcised (περιετμήθητε), not physically, but "with a hand-less circumcision" (περιτομή ἀχειροποιήτω). Whatever is in view, it is not the act of ritual initiation into the covenant of grace. This "hand-less" circumcision is further explained as that instrument "in the putting off of the body of the flesh" which, in Pauline theology, refers to the consequences of Spirit-wrought union with Christ. This circumcision is located, not in any sacrament administered to us, but in the act of Christ's crucifixion, "in the circumcision of Christ."

This argument makes perfect sense, given Paul's "inward/outward" distinction. Without this distinction, Paul's argument becomes incoherent. For Paul, both circumcision and baptism are a ritual death. They both point to Christ's literal, physical death. We are said to have been crucified, buried, and raised with Christ only by virtue of our union with Christ, which for Paul, is realized by faith. This is made unmistakably clear in the last part of vs. 12 and in vs. 13 in the instrumental phrase "through faith" (διὰ τῆς πίστεως). Nowhere in this passage does the apostle Paul make either baptism or circumcision the subject of the verb "to unite" or baptism/circumcision the instrument of that union. For Paul, the Holy Spirit unites the elect to Christ through faith.

Romans 9

It is a given for the Federal Vision writers that covenant and election are, at best, only parallel categories. The Apostle Paul was not so reluctant to connect covenant and election and neither were our confessional theologians.[51] Indeed, this passage would seem to be the antithesis to the Federal Vision's doctrine of conditional, provisional, baptismal benefits.

First, in 9:6, Paul connects this discourse directly with 2:28–29 when he makes the very same distinction by saying that "not all those who are *of* Israel (πάντες οἱ ἐξ Ισραὴλ οὗτοι) *are* Israel." Paul's point is that in the administration of the covenant of grace, not all those who were visibly members of the covenant of grace, who were outwardly related to Abraham, were actually members of the covenant of grace inwardly. They were outwardly Israel, but not spiritually Israel by election.

Paul's proof of this distinction is that some believed and others did not. He is unequivocal that faith is the fruit of election and that faith is the sole instrument for taking possession of Christ's benefits. Faith's sole instrumental function is evident in the grammar of 9:30 where the Gentiles are said to have "appropriated" (κατέλαβεν) righteousness "through faith" (ἐκ πίστεως) not by observing the law (ἐξ ἔργων).[52] He reinforces this point in 9:33 where he says that it is the one "believing" (πιστεύων) in Christ who shall not be put to shame.[53]

In contrast to the Federal Vision theology, Paul's doctrine of unconditional election is situated in and closely related to his doctrine of the administration of the covenant of grace. Throughout this passage, Paul uses election to explain the history of redemption and that to illustrate the nature of divine election. Thus, in v. 11, Paul is at pains to make clear that the divine election is unconditioned by anything except the divine will and nature. God's purpose (πρόθεσις) regarding election (ἐκλογὴν) was not contingent upon anything foreseen in Jacob or Esau. Paul knows nothing of any sort of historically conditioned or contingent election. He views redemptive history as populated by two classes of people, those who are unconditionally elect and those who are reprobated. Verse 13 is categorical in its declaration that God hated (ἐμίσησα) Esau before the latter had opportunity to cooperate with the grace received in his circumcision. In that case, it would seem impossible to say that Esau (or anyone in his class) was ever united to Christ. Only in this case does the anticipated objection (vv.14, 19), "is there injustice with God?" and "Why does [God] blame us?" make sense. If the Federal Vision doctrine of baptismal union with Christ is true, then the apparent injustice is mitigated considerably, since in their theology, the reprobate are those who do not cooperate with the grace given in covenant initiation. Paul, however, offers no such qualification. He is so committed to unconditional, eternal election, that

51. Olevianus discussed these verses at considerable length in his commentary on Romans. He used the doctrine of election not as an abstract *à priori* but as an explanation of the *historia salutis*. He began his argument by considering the covenant promise made to Abraham. See Olevianus, *Ad Romanos*, 418–446.

52. For the same reason he says in Philippians 3:3 and 3:9 that it is those who have righteousness "through faith" (διὰ πίστεως), who are "worshiping God by the Spirit," who are "boasting in Christ," who are "the circumcision."

53. This same doctrine and approach is found in Galatians 3:6–26.

in verses 15–18 he heightens the apparent injustice by appealing to the unconditioned divine will. Both Esau and Jacob were circumcised. Both were members of the covenant of grace, but only one was elect, only one had true faith, and only one was united to Christ. The difference between Jacob and Esau was not cooperation with grace, but eternal, unconditioned, divine election which manifests itself in true faith.

Systematic Theology

As a representative of Reformed orthodoxy, Wollebius' account of the sacraments is particularly helpful in this discussion. He distinguished clearly between, on the one hand, the "internal and heavenly matter" i.e., "the thing signified (*res significata*) namely Christ with all his benefits" and on other hand, the "external form of the sacrament" which "consists of the legitimate administration and participation, according to the command of God" (Wollebius, *Compendium*, 1.22.12, 13). The relation between them is analogical (1.22.14).

The union between the sign and the thing signified, he wrote, is "not natural," and it is "not local" but relational (σχετική; or perhaps "accidental") insofar as the sign represents the thing signified, and by the sign exhibited the thing signified is given to the believer by Christ in the sign exhibited by the minister" (Wollebius, *Compendium*, 1.22.15). As Calvin had argued before him, Wollebius contended that, by distinguishing the sign and the thing signified, signs are not emptied of meaning or importance. They convey information (*significantia*), they exhibit/present grace, they are an application of grace, and they seal grace (1.22.16). The sign of the sacrament conveys the most important information, the gospel of Christ. Second, in the sacramental action, grace is exhibited. Third, to those who believe, the sacrament conveys the thing signified, that is the benefits of Christ, by the fourth the thing promised is sealed or confirmed (1.22.16).

In short, confessional Reformed theology thinks of the sacramental "sign" of baptism as something "rich," not something empty or impoverished. At the same time, we have avoided confusing the sacrament with the thing signified. As Wollebius said:

> The effects of the sacraments are not justification and sanctification *ex opere operato*, but the confirmation and sealing of both benefits. This was obvious from the example of Abraham who was justified before he was circumcised. The papists therefore teach falsely, that the sacraments confer remission of sin and similar benefits *ex opere operato*, by an inherent power.[54]

Hence, he said, "Normally faith is aroused by the Word, confirmed by sacraments."[55]

Initiation and Identification

Another aspect of signification is identification. It is particularly clear from Romans 6, Colossians 2, and 1 Corinthians 10:1–5 that, for Paul, covenant initiation is a ritual, public, identification with Christ. To be identified with him, is not, however, the same thing as being united with him. All the Israelites were "baptized" (into Moses), i.e., were identified with Christ and ate "the same Spiritual food" as we do. Nevertheless Paul goes on to say in v.5, "with most of them God was not pleased…."

For the phrase "baptized into Moses," substitute "united to Christ" and one can see how intense is the problem raised by the Federal Vision doctrine of baptismal benefits. The very point of Paul's argument in these verses is that it is possible to partake of the sacraments, to be ritually, externally identified with Christ and still fall under judgment. It is true faith that actually unites us to Christ, not the sacraments.

Ministerial Recognition

Covenant initiation is a ministerial not magisterial act. When a minister pronounces the declaration of pardon or commination, those words do not create justification or judgment; rather they recognize an existing state of affairs. In Scripture, covenant initiation never creates union with Christ, but rather recognizes that the candidate for baptism is properly the recipient of the sign and seal. Thus, the covenant child is properly the recipient of initiation because he or she is already a member of the covenant of grace and ritually sanctified (1 Cor. 7:14). The mature convert (e. g., Abraham) is baptized in recognition of his faith (Rom. 4: 11). Thus, Wollebius said, "the minister's function is to

54. "Effecta sacramentorum non sunt iustificatio aut sanctificatio tanquam ex opere operato, sed utriusque beneficii confirmatio et obsignatio. Res manifestata est exemplo Abrahami, qui prius quam circumcisus esset iustificatus erat. Rom. 4.11. Falso igitur Pontificii asserunt sacramenta insita quasi vi ex opere operato remissionem peccatorum et similia beneficia conferre" (Wollebius, *Compendium*, 1.22.21). The very same arguments that Wollebius made contra the *Ponficii* could also be made against the Federal Vision doctrine that baptism confers the *beneficia Christi ex opere*.

55. "Quod verbo ordinarie fides excitetur, sacramentis confirmetur" (Wollebius, *Compendium*, 1.22.24).

give the sign, but the function of Christ is to give the thing signified."[56]

Seal: Promise and Guarantee

In the Reformed confessions and orthodoxy, theologians have used "seal" in two senses in two different circumstances. To the baptized infant, who has not yet made a profession of faith, baptism is a promise that if and when he believes everything baptism signifies shall be true of him. When, however, in the second instance, the baptized person trusts Christ, the seal is not only a promise, but a guarantee that what baptism signifies and promises really is true of the believer.[57]

It is in this latter sense that Paul uses the noun "seal" to describe circumcision in Romans 4:11. Abraham believed before he was circumcised. Circumcision did not give the benefits to Abraham, but it did guarantee to him that, by faith, he had them. It is as John Murray said, "The existence of the grace sealed is presupposed in the giving of the seal. The tenet of baptismal regeneration reverses the order inherent in the definition which scripture provides."[58] By stipulating in this way what we mean by "seal," whether we are speaking prospectively (promise) or retrospectively (guarantee), we keep faith in its pivotal place as the hinge of the sacraments and the instrument of union with Christ.

Polemics

The Internal/External Distinction

The Federal Vision approach to covenant, election, and baptism is confused about what the good news is. The gospel is not that one is historically, temporarily elect and shall remain so on the condition of sufficient faith and obedience. Rather, according to Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:1–8, the good news is about Jesus' obedience, death, resurrection. The good news is that whoever trusts in Christ is justified and saved (John 3:16).

The Federal Vision denial of the internal/external distinction and their doctrine of baptismal union with Christ necessarily conflate the substance of the covenant of grace with its administration.[59] The assumption that the biblical writers address the New Testament churches as "elect" because all baptized persons are elect is unnecessary. Calvin's approach to the biblical language is superior. The Apostles' addressed the congregations on the basis of their profession of faith, but they also distinguished those who participated only in the administration of the covenant of grace from those who received its substance.

The Federal Vision writers assume unnecessarily that unless one is united to Christ by baptism one is not actually a member of the covenant of grace. In fact, Esau, Ishmael, and Judas were all members of the covenant of grace. They were recipients of certain blessings attending such membership and subject to the curses of covenant breaking, but they were never elect, united to Christ or justified. They were external members. It is unbiblical and unconfessional to redefine membership in the covenant of grace to exclude such as members or to reject the two kinds of covenant membership.

Election, Apostasy, and the Gospel

The Federal Vision proponent, Steve Wilkins says:

> To be in covenant is to have the treasures of God's mercy and grace and the love which He has for His own Son given to you. But the covenant is not *unconditional*. It requires persevering faithfulness…. The covenant is dependent upon persevering faith.[60]

This quite problematic view follows from the construal of the covenant of grace in terms of privilege wherein baptism becomes "the transition" from death to life so that the baptized now have the responsibility to be covenant keepers as Jesus was a covenant keeper, "even unto death."[61]

Put plainly, their doctrine of the administration of the covenant of grace, despite their formal affirmation of eternal, unconditional election, tends to practical Arminianism. To test this claim, apply the language of the rejection of errors in the Fifth Head of Doctrine of the *Canons of Dort* to the Federal Vision doctrine of the

56. "Ibi enim non opponitur baptismus baptismo, sed comparatio instituitur inter partes ministri in baptismo administrando et Christi: illus enim est dare symbolum, huius vero dare rem signatum" (Wollebius, *Compendium*, 1.23.21).

57. E.g., see *Heidelberg Catechism* Q. 69.

58. John Murray, "Baptism," in *Collected Writings,* 2.375.

59. It could also be argued that, by rejecting this distinction, the Federal Vision has made a Baptist mistake. Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed,* 91, notes that the Baptist John Tombes rejected this distinction in the interest of restricting baptism to the elect. Because neither of them can administer the sacrament as a purely external sign and seal, the full benefit of which is to be realized by faith alone, both the Baptist and the Federal Vision must, in different ways, make the recipients of baptism elect.

60. Wilkins, "Covenant, Baptism and Salvation," in *The Federal Vision,* 64, 65.

61. Though Shepherd revised his language, the basic structure of "privilege" and "responsibility," wherein "faith" is not the sole instrument of justification but primarily a responsibility entailed by baptism, remains.

temporary, conditional, benefits of Christ. In several instances, the doctrines rejected in the *Canons of Dort* are virtually identical to those proposed in the Federal Vision doctrine of baptismal benefits.

Neither Wilkins nor Shepherd makes any distinction between Jesus' obedience to the law for us and our obedience to the law out of gratitude for him. According to Shepherd, the gospel of the covenant of grace under Abraham and Christ is to "do righteousness and justice" (Shepherd, "Evangelism," 56). Here one feels the sting in the tail of their doctrine of baptismal benefits. For the Federal Vision, the Good News is not "whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life …" or the announcement of the objective work of Christ *for us*, but rather: whoever is baptized, trusts, and obeys sufficiently to qualify his faith as "persevering faith" shall be saved.

According to Reformed theology, however, we are not the Savior but the saved, not the Christ, but Christians.[62] Our obedience is not unto justification, but because of justification.[63] Christ obeyed *for us*. His obedience was vicarious. By ignoring this distinction, Shepherd and the Federal Vision writers have made the covenant of grace into a covenant works and this redefinition of the covenant of grace is at the heart of the present controversy.

The root error here is the confusion or rejection of the distinction between law and gospel.[64] By contrast, Scripture clearly contrasts the law, which demands "perfect, personal, and perpetual obedience" (*Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. 20) and the gospel, which offers unconditional favor to sinners, and announces the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of Christ's "perfect obedience and full satisfaction" with no reference to "any thing wrought in" the sinner.[65]

Further, Scripture abounds with examples of the "*compagnie des hypocrites*" who were in the covenant of grace, who really participated in its administration, but who were not "of" the covenant of grace. This claim is supported by the case of apostasy described in Hebrews chapters 4, 6, and 10. As Paul in 1 Corinthians 10, the writer to the Hebrews appeals to the experience of the old covenant believers. In 4:2 he says that we have been "evangelized" (εὐηγγελισμένοι) just as they were. Those who have believed (πιστεύσαντες) have already "entered into the rest." Clearly, however, there are members of the covenant who are in jeopardy of not entering into "the rest" (κατάπαυσιν).

The problem intensifies in 6:4–5. There are some (τοὺς) who have "been enlightened once" (ἅπαξ φωτισθέντες), which according to the early fathers referred to baptism,[66] and who have also "tasted the gift from heaven (γευσαμένους τε τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου), i.e., they have become participants (μετόχους) in the Holy Spirit by participating in the life of the church (and perhaps the Lord's Table). The difficulties attending to this passage are many and it is beyond the scope of this essay to address them in any detail. If, however, we read this passage in the light of the history of administration of the covenant of grace, and *analogia Scripturæ*, in the light of 1 Corinthians 10, and if we read it in the light of the internal/external distinction, some of the difficulties are mitigated and the errors of the Federal Vision doctrine avoided.[67]

Members of the covenant of grace are initiated, catechized, and ordinarily able to make a credible profession of faith. They participate in pubic worship and in the administration of the Lord's Supper. In receiving the ministry of Word (καλὸν γευσαμένους θεοῦ ῥῆμα) and sacraments (δυνάμεις τε μέλλοντος αἰῶνος), they participate in eschatological and spiritual gifts. Hebrews 10:26–29 makes it abundantly clear, however, that such participation, if not "mixed with faith" (Heb. 4:2; AV) brings great danger. If, having been initiated into the covenant of grace, one repudiates Christ (v. 29), and has "trampled underfoot the blood of the covenant" (καταπατήσας καὶ τὸ αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης) the jeopardy is immense. One can expect only "judgment and a fury of fire" (10:27; ESV). This language describes a genuine apostasy but not from election or union with Christ, but from the covenant of grace into which they had been admitted outwardly. Hence they are effectively placed under the curse due covenant breakers (10:31).[68]

The traditional Reformed understanding of these passages is that that they teach a distinction between

62. See *Heidelberg Catechism* QQ. 31 and 32 for a Reformed way of speaking about our relations to Christ.

63. Shepherd and his followers have consistently ignored the fact that the *Heidelberg Catechism* is in three parts: guilt, grace, and gratitude. The last flows from the second, but they are not the same.

64. See Clark, ed. *The Foolishness of the Gospel*, ch. 12.

65. Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 70.

66. E.g. Justin Martyr's *First Apology*, 61, 65. *Early Christian Fathers*, ed. Cyril C. Richardson, vol. 1, *The Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953) 283, 285. Lane, however, rejects this interpretation. See William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, ed. Ralph P. Martin, vol. 47, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas, Tex.: Word Books, 1991) 141.

67. This interpretation follows the trajectory of Calvin's interpretation, that God "sprinkles" (aspergat) the reprobate "with a taste of his grace" (gustu gratiae suae). See *CO,* 33.72

68. Quite similar scenarios and analytical schemes are evident in Jude 11–12 and 1 John 2:19.

those who have Christ's benefits by faith alone and those who participate only in the administration of the covenant of grace. Those who participate only in the administration of the covenant of grace, do benefit from that participation but they do not receive the benefits of election, union, faith, and justification, etc.

Covenant and Election in the Canons of Dort

The first head of doctrine in the *Canons of Dort* (art. 17) says:

> Since the will of God is to be judged from His Word to us, which testifies that the children of believers are holy, not by nature, but by the benefit (*beneficio*) of the covenant of grace, in which they with the parents are comprehended, godly parents ought not to doubt (*dubitare non debent*) concerning the election and salvation of their children (*de electione et salute suorum liberorum*) whom God is pleased to call out of this life in infancy.[69]

John Barach has argued that, unless we are willing to say that covenant children who die in infancy become elect by virtue of their death, we must say that all baptized infants are elect by virtue of their baptism. If all infants are elect by virtue of their baptism, then all baptized persons are elect.

Neither this nor any other article in the Canons teaches, however, that all baptized infants are elect or that all baptized persons are elect. In effect, Barach uses this article as a lever against the internal/external distinction and as a way to create a confessional basis for the Federal Vision doctrine of provisional baptismal benefits.

It will repay us to pay close attention to the language of the article. Barach is correct to appeal to Deuteronomy 29:29 as part of the background of this article. The eternal decree is secret indeed, and we are to attend to the "revealed things." It is not revealed, however, that every baptized person, even every covenant infant, is united to Christ "head for head" in baptism nor does the article say this.

Ordinarily, churches make a judgment about whether a person is a believer on the basis of their profession of faith. In the death of a covenant infant we face an extraordinary case in that we must make a judgment about the state of a covenant child dying without a profession of faith.

We should not do, however, as Barach asks and make a judgment about those infants on the basis of their baptism. That is not the basis on which the Synod of Dort asked us to analyze this problem. The article confesses that "the children of believers (*fidelium*) are holy … by benefit of the covenant of grace." The background for this doctrine, of course, lies in 1 Corinthian 7:14. The children of covenant members are not holy merely because their parents are outward members of the covenant of grace, but because at least one of their parents believes. The basis for the judgment that some covenant children dying in infancy are elect is the parents' profession of faith, not the baptism of the child.

There is considerable evidence for this interpretation. The article speaks of the "benefit of the covenant of grace" (*beneficio foederis gratuiti*). The term *beneficium* was well established in Protestant theology before 1618.[70] It denotes the same elements of the *ordo salutis* discussed in this essay as "Christ's benefits." These benefits, however, are said to belong to *believing parents*. To them is extended the comfort of the covenant of grace that the promises of the covenant apply to their children as well as to them. The qualifier "believing" is essential to a right understanding of the article. The Federal Vision writers misunderstand this distinction because they conflate "profession of faith" with "believers." They are correct to insist that we deal with members on the basis of their credible profession of faith, but they are wrong to identify profession with true faith. This article does not say, "those who make a credible profession ought not doubt," but rather it says that "pious parents (*pii parentes*) ought not to doubt." Indeed, believers ought to trust the promise of God, "I will be your God and your children's God." There is no promise here, however, that the baptized children of all professing members are elect and neither is there an unequivocal promise that all covenant children dying in infancy are elect.[71]

Article 17 must be read in the light of Article 16, which teaches that this promise does not apply to reprobates within the covenant of grace. Article 16 defines the adjectives "believing" and "pious" used in Art. 17. Believing parents are those who have a "living faith in Christ

69. This English translation is modified from Schaff, *Creeds*, 3.585. The Latin text is found in *Creeds*, 3.556.

70. See Clark, *Caspar Olevian*; idem, "The Benefits of Christ: Double Justification in Protestant Theology Before the Westminster Assembly," Anthony T. Selvaggio, ed., *The Faith Once Delivered: Celebrating the Legacy of Reformed Systematic Theology and the Westminster Assembly: Essays in Honor of Dr. Wayne Spear* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, forthcoming).

71. Hence there is no tension between *Westminster Confession* 10.3 when it says, "Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated …" and the *Canons of Dort* 1:17 on this point.

(*vivam in Christum fidem*) and "a sure confidence of the heart" (*certam cordis fiduciam*).[72] This class of members is plainly distinguished from "reprobates" and it is to this class of members that the promise applies.

In his interpretation of article 17, Barach has assumed his denial of the internal/external distinction, confused profession of faith for true faith, ignored the crucial role of true faith as the sole instrument of justification and that which distinguishes those who have Christ's benefits from those who have only the administration of the covenant, and he has read that denial into this article. By doing so, he has constructed a universal benefit to all children of all baptized members without reference to their faith. Nothing in the *Canons of Dort*, read in context, supports such a construction.

Practica

The Federal Vision's concern about the pietist inward turn is legitimate. To ask the question, "Am I elect?" and to seek to answer that question on the basis of sanctity or religious experience is a path to uncertainty and the spiritual turmoil it brings. By turning to baptism as the "transition" from death to life, to use Norman Shepherd's language, the Federal Vision writers intend to give confidence to God's people that they really are elect, really are united to Christ, etc.[73] The Federal Vision writers, however, respond to pietist subjectivism by making every baptized person "elect," but only provisionally so. Steve Wilkins says:

> To be in covenant is to have the treasures of God's mercy and grace and the love which He has for His own Son given to you. But the covenant is not *unconditional*. It requires persevering faithfulness…. The covenant is dependent upon persevering faith ("Covenant, Baptism and Salvation," 64, 65).

According to Wilkins, the good news is: "You are baptized and therefore elect, united to Christ, justified, etc." The bad news is that these benefits are temporary, provisional, and conditional. What is conditional can be lost and must be kept by our obedience.

The practical problem created by the Federal Vision system is this: if every baptized person has Christ's benefits by baptism and if any baptized person can lose those benefits, then baptism becomes law rather than gospel. Such a system, like the medieval system, necessarily creates insecurity, uncertainty, and doubt. As the *Heidelberg Catechism* says, "the holiest men, while in this life, have only a small beginning of such obedience …" (Schaff, *Creeds*, 3.349).

The proper response to unhealthy introspection is not to obliterate biblical, confessional, and dogmatic distinctions (e.g., internal/external membership in the covenant of grace); nor is the answer to redefine the benefits of Christ in temporal, conditional terms. The Reformed response is preach the law in its first use (e.g., *Heidelberg Catechism* questions 3–11, 13, 14) and to preach the gospel of Christ's obedience, death, and resurrection, and to call everyone to true faith in the risen Savior. The answer to the crisis of assurance is to teach God's people to ask the correct question: "do you have true faith as defined by *Heidelberg Catechism* Q. 21?" and to point them to the gospel promise as the source of their assurance.

It is true that every covenant has two sides. Confessional Reformed theology has always taught that the covenant of grace carries with it moral obligation, but to say the covenant must be "kept" in the way the Federal Vision writers do is to turn the covenant of grace into a covenant of works (Rom. 11:6). Our obedience to God's law is not logically parallel to the grace of the covenant or a condition for retaining the benefits of the covenant, but rather a logically and morally necessary consequence of the unconditional grace of the covenant. Obedience to what Olevianus called "stipulations" of the covenant of grace flows naturally (Belgic Confession Art. 24) *from* justification not *to* justification (Clark, *Caspar Olevian*, 190–209).

In distinction from the Federal Vision, the sacraments are to be administered with the understanding that there are two ways of being in the covenant of grace. One may be in the covenant of grace as Esau was (externally only) or the way Isaac was (externally and internally). We are to administer the covenant of grace according to divine command and promise. Both Esau and Isaac are proper recipients of covenant initiation but we understand that according to election not every baptized person will come to faith. We also know, however, that all God's elect shall come to faith and realize the promises made to them in baptism. There is no ground in the promise of the covenant either for presumption that all baptized children are regenerate (or united to Christ) or for the presumption that covenant children are reprobates until they prove otherwise. We are to treat our children as baptized persons, to whom prom-

72. This verbiage links article 16 with *Heidelberg Catechism* Q. 21 which in the Latin text uses the expression "certa fiducia." See Niemeyer, *Collectio Confessionum*, 434.

73. The evidence suggests that the Federal Vision writers are following the course set by Shepherd's 1977 essay.

ises have been made. We should expect our covenant children to take up Christ's benefits for themselves, *sola fide*. We must catechize them faithfully and encourage them to make profession of faith and to come to the Lord's Table, and if they do not, they should face ecclesiastical discipline.

Conclusions

In the Reformed confessions, the Holy Spirit is said to operate through the preaching of the Gospel to regenerate the elect, to create faith in them, and to unite them to Christ. Baptism is a sign and seal of the covenant of grace in which the benefits of union with and faith in Christ are illustrated to all and promised certainly to believers. By contrast, in the Federal vision doctrine, baptism is said to unite the baptized to Christ and bring them "head for head" into possession of Christ's benefits. The chief difference between the two views is the internal/external distinction.

The Federal Vision doctrine of baptismal benefits faces several insurmountable difficulties. First, either it teaches that there is both an eternal election and union with Christ and a temporary, conditional election and union with Christ, or it denies the former in favor of the latter. In either case, whether they propose to replace unconditional election or to supplement it with a temporary, conditional election, the Federal Vision doctrine of baptismal benefits is contrary to the Scripture as understood by the Reformed churches. Second, the Federal Vision doctrine of baptismal benefits is premised upon the elimination of the internal/external distinction. This move virtually requires them to conflate the substance of the covenant of grace with its administration.

The Apostle Paul warned the Colossian congregation about "plausible arguments" (πιθανολογίᾳ; Col. 2:4). Such arguments sound as if they could be true, but though some find them persuasive, they are actually false. This is exactly what we face in the Federal Vision doctrines of baptismal benefits. Because of this apparent plausibility and because the Federal Vision writers profess adherence to the Reformed confessions, some have argued that their views should be tolerated.[74] It is well to remember, however, that Jacob Arminius and his followers made the same assurances of confessional fidelity, and made the same pleas for toleration of their views under the confessional umbrella. Despite those assurances and pleas, the Synod of Dort found the Arminian doctrine substantially at variance with that of the *Heidelberg Catechism* and the *Belgic Confession*.

I contend that the errors we face in the Federal Vision theology require of us the same sort of ecclesiastical fortitude and will to defend the faith and the faithful evident in the Synod of Dort. Just as the Synod of Dort did not take the Arminian claims to confessional fidelity at face value, neither should confessional Reformed and Presbyterian churches today accept the promises of the Federal Vision writers that the Federal Vision is a confessional theology. Given the gravity of the issues before us (namely the doctrines of election, union with Christ, justification, and perseverance) and the abundance of evidence demonstrating contradictions between the confessional teaching and the Federal Vision doctrine, it is past time for confessional Reformed and Presbyterian churches to begin disciplining those pastors, elders, and teachers who teach the Federal Vision doctrine of baptismal benefits. ▪

In Brief: Introduction to the *United States Christian Magazine* 1.1 (1796) 1–2.

When the man of sin, grown to his full stature, had notoriously usurped the seat of Jesus Christ, when the advocates of his imperious and abominable pretensions, deserting "the law and the testimony," taught "for doctrines the commandments of men," when in the church over which he presided, the glories of the gospel were obscured, most of its characteristic truths exploded, and all who were honest enough to profess, and hardy enough to assert them, persecuted with unrelenting malice, and unabating fury; when continuance in her communion was incompatible with a good conscience, and put eternal life in jeopardy; it pleased God to raise up champions of his cause, and eminently to qualify them for their arduous and honourable service. Largely endued with the spirit of faith and fortitude, they entered their solemn *protest* against the corruptions of the grand apostacy: they rescued saving truth from the unrighteous imprisonment to which, by ignorance and fraud, it had long been consigned, and wrestled Christian privilege from sacrilegious hands of ecclesiastical tyranny. Their principles concisely exhibited in the *Confessions* of the different Reformed churches, go by the name of The Doctrines of the Reformation; i.e. those doctrines which are *common* to the Reformed churches. To the propagation of these doctrines many holy men of God devoted the labour of their lives, and sacrificed every earthly consideration: for these they "took joyfully the spoiling of their goods." These they attested with their expiring breath, and sealed with the blood of martyrdom. *These* doctrines the Editors of the *United States Christian Magazine* believe to be the doctrines of the Bible—"the faith of God's elect"—that "faith once delivered to the saints," for which they are commanded "earnestly to contend.… ▪

74. E.g., Jeffrey Ventrella, "Sects in the City (of God)," in *The Backbone of the Bible*, 1–22, where he suggests that various cultural crises should trouble us more than intramural theological debates.